

2012

Leadership and Shaping Your Identity as a New Librarian

Dave Johnston
University of Windsor

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholar.uwindsor.ca/leddylibrarypub>



Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Johnston, Dave. (2012). Leadership and Shaping Your Identity as a New Librarian. *Feliciter*, 58 (2), 9-13.
<http://scholar.uwindsor.ca/leddylibrarypub/1>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Leddy Library at Scholarship at UWindsor. It has been accepted for inclusion in Leddy Library Publications by an authorized administrator of Scholarship at UWindsor. For more information, please contact scholarship@uwindsor.ca.



Leadership and Shaping Your Identity as a New Librarian

In the spring of 2011, I completed the final term of my MLIS degree at the University of Western Ontario in the province where I had spent my entire life. As with many professionals in the field, librarianship was not my first calling. Instead, I found librarianship after many years of wandering in the academic wilderness. My graduate work was in philosophy; I had taught courses, written and presented papers, graded exams, struggled through comps and found additional work as an LSAT prep course instructor to scrape by.

All of this was done with the aim of becoming an academic, and for years this career path was an essential part of my identity. My friends, peers, advisors and mentors were philosophers. We spoke philosophy over drinks, breathed it around campfires, and fumed about it over blackboards smeared in chalk dust and barely legible diagrams. I always felt sorry for the occasional non-philosophers who were forced to spend a social evening with us, either bored out of their minds or entirely lost. Philosophy simply wasn't part of their identity.

Then, in the summer of 2011, I stepped off a plane in New Brunswick to begin my first academic library contract, and suddenly I was the outsider. After three quick semesters and a co-op placement, I was a librarian, but I didn't quite know what that meant. In these reflections I will discuss how my identity as a librarian has been shaped by the opportunities I've had in my new position to reach out to the university community in different ways. Central to this has been the recognition that librarianship is an inherently flexible profession that accommodates leadership initiative and creativity, even from new professionals.

Find your passion and your niche

As a recent graduate stepping into a new job, it is easy to be intimidated by the experience of others. You aren't going to know as much about the operations of your institution as your colleagues who have been directly confronting those issues for much longer than you have. However, this



Photo credit: Katarina Lovrecic

Librarians need to continue to be active participants in the open access movement as more faculty members begin to embrace the full potential of online scholarly collaboration.

doesn't have to exclude you from taking initiative and stepping into leadership roles. We all bring a unique set of interests and passions to our new positions – the specific issues that excite you, anger you or pique your intellectual curiosity. When I started my new position, I looked at the landscape of our library and tried to figure out what areas of opportunity aligned with my professional interests.

My current position is at a primarily undergraduate university with a relatively small library staff who are forced to cover a lot of bases. This kind of strain on staff resources is not uncommon. Coming into this environment, I brought my own unique set of skills and interests along with the energy to try to get new projects off the ground. One of my interests is in reaching students with library instruction outside of the classroom by providing information that they can access online. Making library instruction available through the Internet allows students to get some of the basic information they need when it's relevant to them; you can reach students in classes where there isn't an opportunity for personal instruction, and students have

control over the pacing of the material. Since our library hadn't had the opportunity to move down this path, I saw a chance to suggest a project that aligned with my interests. I raised the issue with the public services committee and soon after began the creation of online video tutorials.

Start conversations

In the university there is of course a second potential layer of intimidation – the professors. However, if your goal is to reach students, then reaching out to faculty members is crucial. The creation of a new resource is really only half

This was the first year that the library marked Open Access Week with a public event. Like many universities in Canada, we are in the process of evaluating our relationship with Access Copyright and are concerned with communicating issues raised in this context to the community, along with raising awareness of Open Access and its motivations more generally. Given my interest in this subject, I took the opportunity to play an important role on the library's Open Access Week Committee. When we began to organize the event, I didn't have a complete understanding of what needed to be done to get the event off the ground. However,

“As new professionals we all bring a unique set of interests and passions – the specific issues that excite you, anger you, or pique your intellectual curiosity. Try to figure out what areas of opportunity align with your professional interests.”

the battle. Making the community aware of that resource so that they can benefit from it is the other half. Without outreach, a great tool may lie buried within the complex infrastructure of the library's website, never to see the light of day. In my experience, faculty members are happy to see that you've taken the initiative to create something that is going to help their students or make their jobs easier by improving the quality of information that students use in their assignments.

If you're responsible for a particular subject area, take the time to contact the members of those departments to make them aware of what you're doing. In most schools, course information is held in and accessed through course management software. Learning modules like video tutorials are easily embedded in such platforms. Access to this space can be gained by talking to professors or the staff in charge of the course management platform. In general, we should be trying to increase the visibility of the library and its resources by starting conversations with the people in charge of relevant access points.

perfect knowledge is not a prerequisite for starting and finishing a new project. Lack of knowledge is an opportunity to draw on the expertise of those around you and learn. Taking the time to observe these skills in action will only help me to prepare for similar endeavours in the future.

Learn on the job

Unfortunately, my contract is coming to an end. I think most of us recognize, or will quickly learn, that the beginning of a new career in librarianship is not always a straight path to permanent employment. Given this, I think that it is essential for new professionals in contract positions to take every opportunity to gain experience and learn while on the job.


While I'm concerned with figuring out what the future will hold for me, there is still time for interesting work to be done where I am. At the moment I'm in the process of

Leadership and Shaping... continued on page 13

A large part of my job relates to being part of the management team and helping to plan for programming, resources and services, both short term and long term. We deal with issues on a regular basis that seemed so obvious in library school: filtering on computers, print vs. electronic access, noise and study space, staffing the service desks, and the future of the library/book/print/education. It's been so important to stay informed by keeping up with professional literature and colleagues. I am grateful for a supportive workplace where new ideas are embraced, there is little red tape, and I have a tremendous amount of autonomy in my job.

As part of some organizational changes at the college level, in January 2012 I took on management of the technical services area of the library. I'm excited about working closely with more staff. This area is made up of three full-time staff with a combined 70 years of service at the library. I know this will be challenging, but I'm less naive about the commitment I'm undertaking and much more confident to try new approaches to continue to build an effective team.

I miss Toronto a lot. That's something I didn't anticipate I'd ever feel when I left. I knew it would be hard to move more than 3,000 kilometres away to a place where I knew no one, but having a positive attitude and appreciating the cultural differences between rural and urban living have made the transition smooth. I've made new friends, participated in local events, and made the most out of the proximity to nature by camping in the mountains.


The experience has been so positive that I wouldn't hesitate recommending a similar path to a new graduate. I feel like I could move anywhere now and build up a new network of colleagues, acquaintances and friends. It's an amazing thing to get so much perspective on our past selves from a new vantage point – in my case, it's sunny southern Alberta. 

Leigh Cunningham (cunning.leigh@gmail.com) received her MLIS degree from the iSchool at the University of Toronto in 2009 and has worked as Collections and Instruction Librarian at Medicine Hat College in southeastern Alberta since July 2009. A project on realia in her Advanced Cataloguing class actually helped her in the job interview.

Leadership and Shaping... continued from page 10

organizing student focus groups to elicit feedback about the library website, which should help inform a redesign of the site in the future. Once again, it was an area of opportunity that aligned with something I had a personal interest in. While I have a lot to learn and prepare in a short time, with the encouragement of a more senior librarian I've decided to try to get the project off the ground and completed before the end of the term. As was the case with the Open Access Week event, I plan on supplementing my knowledge and experience with the experience of those around me to ensure that the project is moving forward.

I began this article by talking about the struggle to find my identity as a librarian. I'll conclude by saying that I have been able to feel at home as a librarian by finding opportunities that align with my interests. Librarianship can be an exciting and engaging profession. This engagement is at least partly a result of the fact that librarianship is a field of open possibilities for new professionals.

During my co-op placement I was told that what libraries need are people who have a passion for the profession. I would now add to this that cultivating a passion for the profession and developing your interests will create opportunities for you to take initiative and step into leadership roles. Again, leading doesn't require knowing everything that needs to be done to accomplish a task. Leading is also an opportunity to learn while having a hand in shaping the library into a place that continues to be relevant to the community it serves. 

David Johnston (djohns23@gmail.com) received his MLIS from the University of Western Ontario in 2011. He has had the opportunity to work in Ontario at the University of Guelph and in New Brunswick at Mount Allison University Libraries. He loves teaching and helping students succeed in their research, as well as making them aware that there is in fact a library website where they can find stuff.